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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000603

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SUBJECT: INSTALLATION OF THE HIGH COUNCIL FOR BIOTECH

REF: (A) PARIS 2249; (B) PARIS 11

1. (U)Summary: After much controversy, Minister for Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development and Regional Planning announced the formation of the new High Council for Biotechnology(HCB). The HCB, whose inception will be May 12, will advise the GOF on a wide range of biotech issues. It has a dual assessment component composed of two committees, one focusing on scientific elements and the other on economic, ethical, and social issues. The previous authority, composed solely of scientists, was disbanded by the GOF in lieu of a process that gives social stakeholders a voice. One of the GOF's top priorities for this committee is to recommend that a similar structure for biotech evaluation be adopted at the EU level. End Summary.

2.(U)On April 22, French Minister of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development and Regional Planning (MEEDDAT) Jean-Louis Borloo officially instituted the new High Council for Biotechnology (HCB). A decree published in the French official journal on December 7, 2008 (REF A) provided the legal basis for its creation. All positions have been filled, including the politically controversial president position.

3.(U)HCB is responsible for advising the GOF on risk assessments methodologies for the environment and public health in a wide range of biotech issues, including genetically engineered products (research in confined and non-confined use, and market release authorization), genetic therapy studies, and use of veterinary drugs derived from biotechnology. HCB will evaluate risks and benefits of these products for public health and the environment.

4.(U)The HCB's annual budget of one million euros will be funded by five Ministries: Environment, Agriculture, Research, Health, and Economy.

5.(SBU)The HCB has a unique dual assessment component composed of two committees, one focusing on scientific elements and the other on economic, ethical, and social issues. "France is the first country to adopt a double assessment, scientific and ethical," said Chantal Jouanno, Secretary of State for Ecology. The HCB is composed of 63 members, to include:

- President: Dr. Catherine Brechignac, current President of the French National Scientific Research Center (CNRS), who is a highly reputed atomic physicist with a reputation for independence and scientific integrity. She is widely perceived as 'completely

neutral' toward biotech products;

- President of the scientific committee: Dr. Jean-Christophe Pages is a virologist, member of the former Genetic Engineering Committee (CGG) that evaluated biotech products for their confined use, and President of the current gene therapy working group of the French Agency evaluating risks and benefits of health products (AFSSAPS);

- President of the economic, ethic and social committee: Ms. Christine Noiville, lawyer, specialist in biotech, risk, health, patent, international trade and environment, bioethics law;

- 34 members on the scientific subcommittee come from a variety of technical background to include: genetics, molecular biology, microbiology, human and animal health, agronomy, statistics, environmental sciences as well as law, economics, and sociology;

- The 26 members on the economic, ethical, and social committee include individuals from the National Ethics Committee, environmental NGOs, consumer organizations, the High Committee for Public Health, the organization of employees of public health entities, farm organizations, the agro-food industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the planting seeds industry, unions of employees of biotech companies, mayors and local government organizations, members of the Parliament Scientific Committee, a lawyer, a economist, and a sociologist.

16. According to the Ministry of Ecology's press release, the HCB will commence work in mid-May with the aim of defining "biotech-free" and providing biotech evaluation recommendations to European authorities(REF B). The HCB has high expectations particularly within seed companies that are unable to conduct

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biotech product field trials in 2009 due to lack of a competent authority.

The fact that coexistence does not make the HCB's priority list suggests biotech cultivation in France (which is effectively banned) is not likely in the near term.

17. Comment: Given the wide range of opinions represented by the HCB's numerous members, and the currently highly political and mostly hostile environment around biotechnology in France, the new authority is likely to come up with conclusions and recommendations that attempt to satisfy a wide range of political constituencies. This does not bode well for biotech cultivation. Recommendations on marketing are likely to emphasize providing consumers with process-oriented information. End Comment.

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